



# To Love The Venerable Poverty

*Letter to our  
brethren*  
SEPTEMBER 2024

**D**uring my visit to the entire Order, which focuses primarily on initial formation and the care of religious in their first years as adult Piarist, I notice a great interest among the brothers in all that the challenge of living the vow of poverty means and in the fact that our ministry is increasingly dedicated to those most in need. I thank God for this sensitivity that I see in the young Piarists. I would therefore like to share with them and everyone else a simple reflection on the challenges they have shared with me.

1-The **starting point** is very clear to me: *“We follow Christ, who was rich and became poor for us in order to enrich us through his poverty.”* This is how the sixth chapter of our Constitutions begins, which is dedicated to the vow of poverty.<sup>1</sup>

I think it is very important that we never forget this. The centre of our life of poverty is following Christ. That is the reason why it is a vow. Our lives are challenged by simplicity and poverty and called to conversion, because that is the lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth.

This statement has many consequences for our way of life. I will content myself with saying that “it has consequences” and quoting some of them, some of the calls that the poverty of Christ suggests to us Piarists today. I will quote them briefly:

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1.- Constitutions of the Order of the Pious Schools, number 63

- a. I think that one of these is simplicity of life, which is the result of detachment and the fruit of inner freedom, which enables you to become “one of many”, like Jesus.<sup>2</sup>
- b. The ascetic value of poverty. We say no to the desire to have more; we say yes to the desire to live with what is necessary for our mission and our life, without the desire to possess anything.
- c. The theological dimension of poverty, which is always understood as the desire to be dependent on God and to trust in Him.
- d. Labour as an expression of poverty. The Priest works hard, not only to support the works dedicated to the poor, but also because he knows that labour is the best expression of the vow of poverty.
- e. The sharing of goods. Poverty means sharing and having nothing for oneself. Poverty is economic transparency and generosity.
- f. The apostolic dimension of poverty. When we are poor, we are credible in proclaiming the Gospel.
- g. The political dimension of poverty. Poverty also means fighting to ensure that there are no poor people and that society develops towards greater justice and fraternity. Poverty is a commitment to the message of “Fratelli tutti”
- h. Our poverty is freely chosen and received as a gift. We must know how to seek and live the key to our poverty and then know how to give a name to what we have to live.

2 - The young people’s questions helped me to deepen **Calasanz’s vision of poverty**. I am very impressed by what our Holy Father says in his Constitutions: *“Religious will love venerable poverty, the mother of excellent humility and other virtues, as the firmest defence of our Congregation; they will preserve it in all its integrity and some-*

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2.- Philippians 2:5-11

*times strive to experience its consequences.”<sup>3</sup>*

The two images Calasanz uses make me very thoughtful: “**mother**” and “**firm defence**”. I would like to share some intuitions with you all.

**MOTHER.** If poverty is a mother, it is because it brings forth life, because it cares for this life, educates it, accompanies it and allows it to grow. That is what it means to be a mother.

Poverty is a mother because it helps us to love from an ever greater distance from ourselves. She is a mother because she helps her children to seek real food that nourishes them and has nothing to do with material goods. She is a mother because she helps to build fraternal relationships, both inside and outside the community.

Poverty is a mother because it teaches us real values. And in a world like ours, so characterised by selfishness and materialism, poverty helps us to grow in hospitality, to feel co-responsible for the fate of the poor and, with growing inner peace, to embrace one of the strongest forms of poverty we experience, which is none other than that of being a minority and knowing that we are a minority.

Poverty is a mother because it helps us to appreciate and nurture our greatest wealth: faith in Jesus Christ. We know that this faith is becoming less and less important in many places. But that does not discourage us, because it is about our riches and we want to share them.

Poverty is a mother, because when we experience contempt, criticism, ignorance or even persecution in the Order or in the Church, it helps us to live like Christ, who was the first to experience this.

Poverty is a mother because it helps us to understand what trust in God means. It is the mother of faith and a source of joy.

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3.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. Constitutions of the Pauline Congregation, number 137

**FIRM DEFENCE.** Calasanz sees poverty as a wall that defends the life of the Order, as something that protects us. We need to think about this. What does poverty protect us from?

I think that poverty essentially protects us from the danger of worldliness. Worldliness, which tends to value prestige, power, economic resources and a “living well”, is a challenge that we must know how to combat. This results in many tensions and sometimes contradictions that we must recognise and deal with.

Poverty helps us a lot to differentiate between the resources we need for our mission and those we need for our lives. And we need to recognise that in some cases – and in some communities – we are not able to distinguish between the two.

The experience of poverty requires transparency, including in the economic sphere, in accountability and in the use of goods. Poverty helps us to manage our assets well and to recognise that we must always set clear priorities and take care of them. Among these priorities, the care of the elderly and the formation of young people deserve special attention. Thinking of them and not of ourselves is also a gift of poverty.

Poverty is even a defence of the institution. As you know, poverty saved the Order at the time of the reduction of 1646. The Order was not definitively dissolved, but condemned to a “slow death”, because if it had been dissolved, the authority that had decided this would have had to provide for the maintenance of the religious (and there were about 500 of them) if they were poor and had no means.<sup>4</sup> That is why poverty saved the Order.

3-Our **Constitutions** point us to some keys with which we can fulfil our vow of poverty. They are very concrete and meaningful. I would like to mention just a few of them: Frugality in our way of life, submission to the common law of labour, just and moderate use of goods, care for common things, our generosity in offering our labour and time to others, the proper stewardship of our

goods, our commitment to justice and human rights, etc. The key is to “be “poor in spirit and in deed”<sup>5</sup>.

This statement “in spirit and in deed” challenges us to be authentic. Poverty is a spiritual choice that must manifest itself in our daily lives. Because it is spiritual, it is an expression of our faith and our vocation. And if it is, it must show itself in our work, in our decisions and in our mood. Authenticity is the criterion for the truth of religious consecration.

4-**The care of the vow of poverty.** Like the other vows, the vow of poverty must be well cared for so that it can be lived with increasing authenticity. I believe that there are two clear risks with each of the four vows we take: the temptation to minimise the requirements, and the negligence of not engaging with the content and meaning of the vow, which results in us not learning to be poor.

For example, the vow of poverty is minimised when we do not question anything we experience, or when we are irresponsible with the money we share, or when we think that the money we are given belongs to us, or when we succumb to the temptation to have the best gadgets because it is “obvious” that I need them, and above all, when we forget the poor and they cease to be part of our true identity. And in many other ways.

The vow of poverty is neglected if we don’t spend time and effort thinking about it in order to “learn to be evangelically poor”. We need to reflect more on the evangelical keys linked to poverty: the Beatitudes; the spirituality of trust in God who will give us what we need; the practise of fraternity; the preference for the little ones. We speak of evangelical poverty: that is our vow. And this poverty is directly linked to solidarity with the little ones and the poor.

For Calasanz, the experience of poverty means fighting for the redemption of the poor. An important aspect that guided Calasanz in his work was his “social vision”. He saw the poverty of the people, the suffering of the people and especially

4.- Severino GINER: “Calasanz. Maestro y Fundador”. Ed. BAC, Madrid, 1992, pp. 1045-1046

5.- Constitutions of the Order of the Pious Schools, number 69.

of the children as a challenge to which he had to respond. It is very interesting to read sentences like this in his constitutions: *“In almost all states, the majority of their citizens are poor”*.<sup>6</sup> This statement comes from his experience, from what he experienced in the depths of his Piarist soul.<sup>7</sup>

5-I add a final thought. I am convinced that one of the most precious gifts that poverty offers us is to remain **faithful to our vocation: perseverance**. Poverty, which frees us from the seduction of material good<sup>8</sup>, helps us to become ever more faithful to the commitments of our vocation that we have taken on. Perhaps it does this because it helps us to be “less distracted” by things, experiences and endeavours that we do not need.

I am very enlightened by the reflections that the Council decree “Ad gentes” makes when it speaks about the missionary. It says: *“This response, however can only be given when the Holy Spirit gives His inspiration and His power. For he who is sent enters upon the life and mission of Him Who «emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave» (Phil. 2:7). Therefore, he must be ready to stay at his vocation for an entire lifetime, and to renounce himself and all those whom he thus far considered as his own, and instead to «make himself all things to all men» (1 Cor. 9:22).”*<sup>9</sup>

The message is loud and clear: perseverance in a vocation that demands total self-giving is strengthened by the dynamic of self-denial, by renouncing putting yourself at the centre and choosing to follow the One who has called you. And this is the basis for the vow, the religious consecration.

Calasanz was convinced that fidelity to one’s vocation is closely linked to the experience of poverty. He always fought for this principle because he knew the human heart. He knew that the Pia-

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6.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. Constitutions of the Pauline Congregation, number 198.

7.- Enric FERRER. “A School for the Poor and the Reform of Society: Saint Joseph Calasanz”. “CORINTHIANS XIII” Magazine, number 164, October-December 2017, page 95.

8.- Constitutions of the Order of the Pious Schools, number 63

9.- Second Vatican Council. Decree *Ad gentes divinitus*, number 24.

rist vocation would be strengthened if the heart of the young religious could detach itself from the desire to have in order to consecrate himself only to the desire to serve Christ and the children.

I end these brief reflections with a concern. The chapter of our Constitutions dedicated to poverty ends with the invitation to find new ways of living poverty, in openness to the Holy Spirit, in harmony with the charism and the demands of our time.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps good to reflect on this challenge: what new ways can we discover to live our vow of poverty? I leave the question open. Hopefully we can think about it together.

Receive a fraternal embrace. With my best fraternal wishes.

*Fr Pedro Aguado Sch.P.  
Father General*

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10.- Constitutions of the Order of the Pious Schools, number 75.